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ABSTRACT

This address focuses on the power of sharing individual stories and empowering individuals to be strong in their lives. Numerous anecdotes are used throughout the speech to address the power of the encounter. The speaker asserts that the telling of individuals' stories, verbally and in writing, leads to encounters of faith and moments of love. The presenter sees one of the scandals of Catholic education as the failure to produce leaders. Leadership is developed by the sharing of stories and by being responded to by those who care. Two goals for evangelization can be achieved by listening and responding to the stories people hear: (1) prophetic solidarity; and (2) patient reconciliation. (EH)

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Catholic Education - We Come to Share Our Story.

by Bishop G. Patrick Ziemann

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CATHOLIC EDUCATION - WE COME TO SHARE OUR STORY

NCEA Convention - April, 1997 - Bishop G. Patrick Ziemann

Keynote Address

Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Address as President of South Africa:

> Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God: your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others.

How do we overcome our fear, and unleash our power so that the glory of God may be manifest from within us children of God?

By identifying my talents within the stories of my life, and by sharing my stories so that my light may shine, thereby giving other people permission to share their stories and shine their lights.

Barry Sanders, A is for Ox:

> How does one come to feel confident and strong? The first steps come out of thin air -- the human voice. Speaking sentences to another human being, listening for a response, marshaling thoughts in order to respond again, and on and on, encourages a person to care about other people -- to pay attention to their "story" -- and to weave their story into one's own. It generates trust. In the exchange of stories, the hope arises, as the poet Robert Browning writes, that the other will "rap and knock and enter in our soul." When the door opens, we pray that someone interesting is at home. But the self -- that instrument of reflective subjectivity and humane coherence that modern society assumes as its ultimate experiential and moral reference point -- cannot and should not be taken for granted. Without a literacy based of a fully experienced social orality, that self remains a psychological and social impossibility.

Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone wants to tell the story, but is there anyone out there who cares enough to listen? It is in the telling and sharing of our individual stories to others who care that we discover and shine our lights.

We can only be happy in life by growing in our talent areas, but I do not know my talents until you tell me them, until you encourage me in them, until you celebrate them with me. And you

will not know them until I tell you my stories. This principle of co-responsibility between us, the need for solidarity of all humans, is best expressed by the mirror. Our faces are important to our identities. Scar my face and you scar my identity. We Americans each year put billions of dollars on our faces in facial, skin, and hair care because we value the way we look, and we know it reflects importantly who we are, our identity. But the enigma is this: I will never see my face ever, face-to-face. You all see me face-to-face, but I will only see my face when it is reflected back in a mirror. And I will only know myself and my identity and my talents when you reflect them back to me because you have heard my stories, you have discovered my talents in my words, expressions, interests, and action, and you have played them back to me continuously. Millions live and die unhappily because no one ever told them their talents in which they could grow and find their happiness!

Stories create the encounter and the encounter liberates. When the movie E.T. opened, it was a sensational success, so much so that people wrote letters to E.T., and one of the letters reflected the power of an encounter:

> Dear E.T.,
>
> I am Tommy Andonian's mother, and I am writing this letter for him as Tom has never really learned to write much more than his first name. Tommy is 20 and autistic, and he prefers his own strange inner world to the real one outside himself. Since he has always enjoyed movies filled with special effects, spacecraft and startling aliens, it was only natural for his parents to take him to E.T. In the darkened theater, Tommy came out of himself. He screamed, he clapped, he laughed, and then he cried -- real tears. Autistics do not weep, not for themselves or any others. But Tommy wept, and Tommy talked, nonstop about E.T. He has seen E.T. three times now and is prone to touching fingers with others and solemnly repeating, "ouch." E.T. has changed his life. It has made him relate to something beyond himself. It's as though Tommy has also been an alien life form and trying to find his way home, just like E.T.

E.T. touched Tommy's heart like no one else ever had - even with twenty years of therapy and medicines. Tommy was trying to find his way home, and E.T. showed the way. It liberated him and allowed him to relate for the first time with others in communication so that now for the first time in his life Tommy was able to tell his stories.

We humans are made in the image and likeness of God, and God's Word became flesh to tell us God's stories, communicated through the voices of the prophets, nature, human goodness, and our search for truth. The Son of God became human to show humans how to live as humans, as the Second Vatican Council taught us. That is what it means to be human - to tell our stories with those who care and who reflect back our talents and lights. And that is the business of education!! Leo Buscaglia in his book Living, Loving and Learning, relates the following statement from a survivor of a concentration camp who was speaking to a convention hall of educators:

> "I am a survivor of a concentration camp.
> My eyes saw what no person should witness.

Gas chambers built by *learned* engineers.
Children poisoned by *educated* physicians.
infants killed by *trained* nurses.
Woman and children shot and killed by *college graduates*.
So I'm suspicious of education.
My request is: *help your students to be human.*
Your efforts must never produce learned monsters,
skilled psychopaths, or educated Eichmanns.
Reading, and writing and spelling and history
and arithmetic are only important if they serve to make our students *human.*"

Teach our students to be human!! And for us Christians, the major paradigm or model of humanity is the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ who became human to show us humans how to live as humans!

The telling of our stories, verbally and in writing, leads to encounters of faith and moments of love. In a story written by S. J. Kishor, John Blandford was a young man training in bootcamp who checked out a novel from the camp's library. The owner of the novel who had donated it to the camp has written marginal notes, and John became more interested in her notes than in the novel. He discovered her address in the fly page of the book, wrote to her and she responded in kind. Over a short period of time, John discovered that he was becoming fascinated by her and perhaps even in love with this woman, Hollis Meynell. He asked her for a photograph of herself, and she refused. "Love me for who I am, not how beautiful or young you wish me to be." She only indicated that she was unmarried as was John. After a year of telling his stories to her in love letters, and she to him, they scheduled a meeting for the first time, since John was allowed to return from the Pacific war zone. Their signs of recognition would be that she would wear a red rose in her coat and he would be standing in his uniform under the clock in the train station at 6:00 p.m. And the story goes:

> One minute to six John Blandford pulled hard on a cigarette. Then his heart leaped. A young woman was coming toward him. Her figure was long and slim; her blond hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears. Her eyes were blue as flowers, her lips and chin had a gentle firmness. In her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive.
>
> He started toward her, entirely forgetting to notice that she was wearing no rose, and as he moved, a small, provocative smile curved her lips. "Going my way soldier?" she murmured.
>
> Uncontrollable, he made one step closer to her. Then he saw Hollis Meynell. She was standing almost directly behind the girl, a woman well past forty, her graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump; her thick ankled feet were thrust into low heeled shoes. But she wore a red rose in the rumpled brown lapel of her coat.
>
> The girl in the green suit was walking quickly away. Blandord felt as though he were

being split in two, so keen was his desire to follow the girl, yet so deep was his longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned and upheld his own and there she stood. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible; he could see that now. Her gray eyes had a warm kindly twinkle.

Lieutenant Blandord did not hesitate. This would not be love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even rarer than love - a friendship for which he had been and must ever be grateful....

He squared his broad shoulders, saluted and held the book toward the woman, although even while he spoke he felt choked by the bitterness of his disappointment. "I'm Lieutenant John Blandford, and you - you are Miss Meynell, I'm so glad you could meet me. May, may I take you to dinner?"

The woman's face broadened in a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is all about, son," she answered. "That young lady in the green suit, who just went by, begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you that she's waiting for you in that big restaurant across the street.

One of the scandals of Catholic education is the failure to produce leaders. The evidence for that statement is that one could ask any senior class a day before graduation, or an eighth grade class or the Confirmation class, "How many of you are leaders?" and very few, maybe 10%, would raise their hands. That word does not readily compute with their own self-identity. But then, if you describe to them that a leader is anyone who makes a difference for good, and anyone could be a leader over oneself, with your friends, in your home or neighborhood, that you don't have to be elected, smart, popular, extrovert, etc., and they were then asked the question again, they would all raise their hands. As educators, we need to produce leaders with the youth and adults we serve. "Playing small does not serve the world" and "shrinking so that others around us will not feel insecure" is not enlightened. Our leadership formation in the Church and school is based upon the need and reality of encouraging our people to tell their stories because we will not only listen, but better yet, we will respond. Have you ever sat around a table with others, everyone listening to the agenda being discussed and shared, but no one ever responding to what anyone else said!! I am <u>not</u> a good listener unless I respond to what is being said. And we in Church and school are too often terrible listeners and utterly non-responsive! Our role as educators is to be talent scouts, encouraging stories, responding to them by reflecting back talents, and thereby "growing" leaders in the soil of their own experiences, history, and encounters.

By sharing our stories and being responded to by those who care, we not only develop leadership within ourselves and others, but we re-establish soul and spirituality to our society again. Courage to be oneself and humility in the face of the transcendent are qualities all need to possess, if we but banded together in this venture. Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czech Republic, described his vision of the type of politician the world needs today, a vision that could easily be attached to any leader. (Given on February 4, 1992 in Davos, Switzerland).

> A politician must become a person again, someone who trusts not only a scientific representation and analysis of the world but also the world itself. He must believe not only in sociological statistics but (also) in real people. He must trust not only an objective interpretation of reality but also his own soul, not only an adopted ideology but also his own thoughts, not only the summary reports he receives each morning but also his own feeling. Soul, individual spirituality, first-hand personal insight into things, the courage to be himself and go the way his conscience points, humility in the face of the mysterious order of being, confidence in its natural direction, and above all, trust in his own subjectivity as his principal link with the subjectivity of the world--these, in my view, are the qualities that politicians of the future should cultivate.

But when does that formation of leadership begin if not now, in our schools and religious education programs, in our churches and in our homes. And does it not always start with the sharing of our stories?

Pope John Paul II has officially begun the three-year Church preparation for Jubilee 2000. He calls for a new evangelization, for the end of a culture of death and the beginning of a civilization of peace. He reminds us what the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican II (Gaudium et Spes) states in section 40:

> The Church "serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society, as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family... The Church not only communicates divine life... but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all:
>
> 1) by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person
> 2) by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society
> 3) by the way it imbues everyday activities with a deeper meaning and importance

Our story - telling will initiate such a new evangelization if we focus on two goals to be achieved by our listening and responding to the stories we hear.

First, the goal of <u>PROPHETIC SOLIDARITY</u>. Ezekiel the prophet saw the vision of God and heard:

> "I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them:
> 'Thus says the Lord God.'
> Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that <u>there has been a prophet among them</u>.)" (2:4-5)

Do we not need our own contemporary prophets from among our ranks now, and do they not need to listen to the Lord God, to hear his stories and to be uttering them in his name? The Lord's own stories need to be told and re-told <u>by</u> the Lord's own people and <u>to</u> the Lord's own people and beyond. It is the fool who believes that his own life revolves around only himself, and

that there is no need for the transcendent God. We learn from each other and we grow together in our own experiences with each other. The absence of this principle of solidarity is summed up in words from T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral:

> We do not know very much of the future
> Except that from generation to generation
> The same things happen again and again.
> Men learn little from others' experience.
> But in the life of one man, never
> The same time returns. Sever
> The cord, shed the scale. Only
> The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
> He can turn the wheel on which he turns.

In October, 1995, John Paul II spoke to the entire world through the agency of the United Nations when he appeared before that international body and delivered these words:

> The idea of "family" immediately evokes something more than simple functional relations or a mere convergence of interests. The family is by nature a community based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect. In an authentic family the strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served.

He challenged all communities, as a modern-day prophet, to become families, where the weakest and those most hurting and vulnerable receive the greatest attention in love, resources, and energy. Such is not the case in our own society and even in our own churches. Solidarity calls us to become brothers and sisters in God's human family, and have our agenda reflect the same.

Jesus spoke a story about this need for solidarity when he spoke the parable of the good samaritan. It came as a response from the student of the Law who asked: "And who is my neighbor?" The beauty of this parable is that the samaritan changed his agenda to help the man beaten up and lying in the ditch, while the religious leaders did not have time for this act of solidarity. What a magnificent church we could become if our major focus as parish, school or group was the person in the ditch, the one who needs my help here and now and to bring that one with his or her story to the inn of my care and recruit others to care for them. There are millions of stories "out there" eagerly waiting to be heard, but does anyone really care enough to listen and respond?

The second goal towards building a new evangelization through story-telling is PATIENT RECONCILIATION. Such a reconciliation is accomplished only gently and slowly, trusting in the power of confessing hurts and anger, and responding to others. It is the telling of "the secrets of the hearts," in the words of Cardinal Newman:

> Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low,
> why our attainments are so poor,
> our view of the truth so dim,

our belief so unreal,
our general notions so artificial and external is this:
that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts.
We have each the same secret,
and we keep it to ourselves,
and we fear, as a cause of estrangement,
that which really would be a bond of union.
We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly;
we make clean the outside of things;
we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds,
but our love is not enlarged,
our bowels of affection are straitened,
and we fear to let the intercourse begin at the root;
and, in consequence,
our religion, viewed as a social system , is hollow.
The presence of Christ is not in it.

Honesty raises the standard of holiness among us, and presents us to the world as a church that exposes its hurts, seeks forgiveness from within and from outside, and shares the secrets of our hearts, to speak our stories. But is there anyone out there who cares enough to listen?

One story of reconciliation I will never forget. It occurred several years ago when the bones of Josef Mengele, the concentration doctor, were found, but before they had been authenticated as belonging to him. One of his victims was Mark Berkowitz who served him then as a seven-year old Jewish messenger boy. His story of redemptive love in the midst of hellish torture has strengthened me often. He spoke how he as a boy never lost faith in God while in Mengele's clutches, and, what he would do if Mengele were sill alive, how he would respond:

> "Mengele was a great one for telling lies. Before the experiments began, he came and tattooed my number personally. In a gentle voice he said,
>
> > "You're a little boy, and we have to do it so it grows with you. Whenever you look at the number you'll always think of me. This is to show the people that it doesn't hurt and you don't have to be frightened. It's for safety reasons, in case you get lost."
>
> When the experiments began, he told us the pain is only temporary and it will help us survive the environment. They put us in freezing baths, smeared chemicals on our skin, but it was the needles we were most afraid of. After the first 150 injections I stopped counting.
>
> I was brought up to love God. For me hate would have been the greatest crime. That fascinated Mengele...so he made me his messenger boy. One morning in July 1944, I

spotted my mother among a long line of women moving toward the gas chamber. I had not seen her in six weeks. Mengele...gave me an errand to the crematorium. He knew I would see my mother go to her death. A couple of days later he asked me if I still believed in God. I said,

> "Everything has been taken from me now.
> But God you will never take because he instilled the feeling in me,
> and only he can take it away..."

If Mengele is caught, though, I don't want to see him suffer. Justice to me would be for him to spend time with me. I will be his servant again, very courteous. At the end of two years with me he will say,

> "Yes, we can teach our children not to hate."

I have no doubt I can redeem him without force. He'll see that goodness is far more rewarding than evil."

Such an attitude of redemptive love, of healing through loving and reconciling is a needed antidote in a society that believes in "in-your-face" responses.

All lies within the power of the story and the telling of that story. No new programs are needed, no new funding. It is simply believing in the "Word becoming flesh" that we might hear God's story and see it reflected within our own lives. It is encouraging others to tell their stories that we might reflect back to them their talents and their identities to enable them to let their light shine to make manifest the glory of God within themselves. It is in the witnessing of our faith, along with the teaching of our religion, that the new evangelization will occur and Jubilee 2000 celebrated.

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